

0410

The Development of a Hedonistic Experience Brand: Australia's MONA

Kim Lehman¹, Debra Leighton²

¹*University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia,* ²*University of Salford, Manchester, United Kingdom*

Abstract

The case of Australia's Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) is unusual in many respects. It is privately owned and funded by millionaire David Walsh. It is located in Hobart, the capital of the island state of Tasmania, Australia, a long way from the art capitals of the world. More significantly MONA is the umbrella brand for a range of products that are aimed at the luxury brand consumer, the consumer that will think little of travelling half way around the world for an unusual and memorable experience. Moreover, the MONA product range-wine, beer, art, accommodation, and music-is clearly aimed at those consumers seeking a hedonistic experience. This paper provides an overview of how MONA is developing, given that the art museum at the core of the umbrella brand has yet to open, and that some of the other products are a legacy from a former organisation. It also discussed the role and philosophy of David Walsh as the vision behind the brand. The research for this case is drawn from a longitudinal project that is tracking MONA from its early stages, through to its opening, and on to a review once it has been operating for a year.

Introducing MONA

On the surface gathering together a number of business units under an umbrella brand, developing a consistent and clear branding strategy, and bringing the offer to market is commonplace enough. However, there is little that is commonplace about MONA. For a start its home is in Hobart, the capital city of the island state of Tasmania, Australia. This is a long way from the art capitals of the world, London and New York. The acronym itself stands for Museum of Old and New Art. The privately owned art museum—unusual in Australia's museum sector—at the core of the corporate brand MONA has a significant though small collection, but it is still under construction (Exhibit 1). It will open in January 2011 at a reputed cost of AU\$70 million (£39.5 million) and have free entry. That it is almost a fully formed entity in the minds of many in the art and museum communities in Australia, and with Australian cultural consumers, is testament to the success of the strategies put in place by MONA.

Central to understanding MONA is the fact it is the entirely the brainchild of, and entirely funded by, millionaire David Walsh, variously described by the media as “a professional gambler”, a “rabid atheist”, and a “university drop-out and autodidact” (Coslovich 2007: 5). Whatever the truth about David Walsh, he has a vision for MONA that is quite clear, and very personal. Of course private museums are by definition idiosyncratic. Still, David Walsh stresses the subjective nature of MONA at every opportunity. He has been quoted as saying:

I've got a soapbox that I want to stand on. I've got some things to say. I'm the kind of person who would scream obscenities into the wind in Hyde Park if I was English, but I'm not English. (cited in Schwartzkoff 2009: 12.)

Much of the art in MONA's collection is evidence of Walsh's stance. He owns Chris Ofili's “The Holy Virgin Mary”, which has Mary as a black woman surrounded by female genitalia and elephant dung. He has recently purchased the latest version of the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's “Cloaca Professional”, a machine that mimics the human digestive system to produce what looks and smells like faeces. David Walsh, as well as the other senior staff that have media contact, continually note that the themes of the museum will be sex and death, and it aims to be provocative, to stir opinion.

Of course, MONA is not just the art museum. Under the umbrella brand MONA sits, in some ways, the more obvious hedonistic products of Walsh's vision. The original product of the corporate brand was Moorilla wine, now rebranded with a more ‘edgy’, more sophisticated positioning, complete with sensual branding (Exhibit 2). There is also the successful boutique beer brand Moo Brew, with labelling designed by Australian artist John Kelly and a distinctive and very non-beer champagne-shaped bottle (Exhibit 3). At the cellar door for both these products is a restaurant called The Source (Exhibit 4), named after artist John Olsen's 6 metre work on the ceiling of the foyer. Recently opened is an additional 4 apartments for the luxury accommodation that features work from the art collection, designer furniture and controversial architecture. There are now 8 apartments collectively named The Pavilions on the edge of the Derwent River, each named after an artist or architect (Exhibit 5) and costing AU\$7.6 million (£4.3 million) to build the new and remodel the existing buildings. The final product within the MONA umbrella brand is MONA FOMA, or MOFO, a Festival of Music and Art—2010 was its second year (Exhibit 6). Curated by Brian Ritchie of the post-punk band the Violent Femmes, MOFO 2010 had John Cale, late of the influential band Velvet Underground and fresh from the 2009 Venice Biennale as its ‘eminent artist in residence’. The humorous and self-deprecating tone of the MONA statements regarding MOFO can be illustrated thus:

MONA FOMA is back for the second year and promises to be almost as good as the first. It also promises to take itself even less seriously (MONA 2009).

Conceptualising a hedonistic experience

In some quarters hedonism represents all that is bad about modern society. At the very least, as a driver of consumer markets it is viewed with suspicion. Somewhat confusingly the term is used throughout the literature in several contexts. For example, in moral philosophy ‘hedonism’ denotes the view that a good life is one that is pleasurable, while in psychology it represents the theory that pleasure seeking is a key motivator of human behaviour (Elliot and Covington 2001). Within this latter debate Rozin (1999) has suggested that pleasure be defined as “a positive experienced state that we seek and that we try to maintain or enhance”

and its 'flipside' pain as "a negative experienced state that we avoid and that we try to reduce or eliminate" (1999: 112).

In the marketing literature hedonism is frequently linked to consumer behaviour. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002) discuss the background and definitions of hedonism and enter the debate of surrounding the link between hedonism and consumerism—how responsible is marketing for a consumer society that is said to be largely hedonistic? A valid point is raised by Williams (2007), who comments that:

contemporary consumers are as likely to be driven by thrift as to they are to be hedonistic, they use consumption to make statements about themselves... to create their identities and they develop a sense of belonging through consumption (2007: 483).

Clearly, where hedonism fits into the public psyche is significant, and particularly in relation to luxury brands such as MONA. Therefore, while recognising the complexity of the concept, for the purposes of this case, the term hedonism simply refers to the pursuit of pleasurable experiences of 'a certain type', as defined by popular opinion. As O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002) have noted, the dominant public view of the meaning of hedonism relates to "self-gratifying sensuality", and not just to an activity such as listening to an orchestra despite the fact it is perceived as pleasurable by many (2002: 527). The public perception of hedonism is perhaps best illustrated by this comment from an arts writer reviewing Tasmania's art scene, including MONA, who stated: "Food and wine, art and location—particularly a destination reached by water—are irresistible ingredients for those in the short-stay market with a yen for the good life" (Engberg 2009).

The early stages

To an extent the product range now being developed as an hedonistic experience at MONA harks back to the original Moorilla brand and to David Walsh's first involvement. David Walsh purchased Moorilla Estate—essentially just a vineyard—as part of a syndicate of local business people in 1995. It was in poor financial shape and in need of revitalisation. As part of the revitalisation of Moorilla Estate music concerts on the Moorilla site began in March 1996. Such concerts are now marketed as MONA Events, and form an important part of the branding strategy, not least as they bring consumers on to the MONA site where other products are available. Similarly, the apartments that were the forerunners of The Pavilions were built in 2001 and renovated as part of the rebranding in 2009. They have been, therefore, part of the original product range but, as with the other products, they are now being 'repackaged' as part of the sensory experience branding of MONA. The same is true for the Moorilla wine. That has had a solid reputation within Tasmania, but has never been known as particularly innovative or aggressive in its pursuit of market share elsewhere. Throughout the last few years it has undergone a significant change of image.

Some years after the original purchase of Moorilla Estate David Walsh bought the syndicate out—the exact date is not publicly available. It is this stage of the MONA story that is difficult to shed light on. Certainly through the 1990s, as Walsh's wealth, interest and knowledge was increasing, he was collecting ancient art and objects. In this period he converted a house built by the original owner of Moorilla, a pioneer of the Tasmanian wine industry Claudio Alcorso, into a Museum of Antiquities. This museum, though housed in a Sir Roy Grounds designed building and including many rare artefacts, remained largely unknown. However, it did well enough to encourage Walsh to pursue the building of a much more substantial museum with a much expanded raison d'être, and drawing on a much expanded personal art collection now incorporating significant modern and contemporary art works. Discussions with Melbourne-based architect, Nonda Katsalidis, designer of Melbourne's tallest building the Eureka Tower, is said to have commenced in 2002 (Neales 2008), with construction work on the museum starting in mid-2007.

Subsequently the art museum product, the core of the MONA brand, has been developing, both in a practical sense and in a branding sense. On the practical side the curatorial and collection based issues that need to be addressed have been quietly progressing. MONA has a state of art collection facility in suburban Hobart. A number of professional staff are now

cataloguing, researching provenance and history and generally undertaking tasks as would be found in any modern art museum. Interestingly, a number of the senior staff have come from Sotheby's Australia. This may, of course, be linked to David Walsh's position as one of Australia's most significant art collectors—he would know the staff of Sotheby's well, and be in a position to notice well qualified and knowledgeable staff. Also important here, though, is the very personal nature of MONA. With such a radical approach to both art museums and to business the success of MONA is linked to the selection of key staff that share the vision of the owner, David Walsh.

That there is a clear MONA corporate culture is obvious. The branding activities apparent during these developmental early stages reflect this. The move away from a traditional advertising approach and a traditionally framed product is part of the David Walsh philosophy, and therefore a part of the MONA culture. The branding of Moo Brew, noted above, with its art inspired labels, are an example. The same is true of the labelling of the Moorilla wine also noted above. The use of nude figures and sensual forms reference the art that is at the core of MONA, but it also references David Walsh's philosophy and the themes of sex and death central to his collection. Similarly, in the remodelled Pavilions there are interconnections between the art collection, the food and wine, and the location. The use of these hedonistic cues, that provide consumers with indicators of what MONA can offer, have not happened by accident, but by strategic intent.

Recent developments

In media stories through December 2009 and January 2010 two quite important topics were 'announced' (Coslovich 2009; Rhodes 2010; Strickland 2009). The first was the dropping of the Moorilla brand to be just that of the wine. The Moorilla Estate, as the peninsula on which MONA is located, is widely recognised by the local population. It was the name given it by Claudio Alcorso. But it has little resonance outside Tasmania and MONA has seen that as an umbrella brand it would not do. The risk was, of course, that the art museum would just be thought of as a museum attached to a vineyard, and not a cultural entity in its own right. Further, moving the wine to be a sub-brand of MONA suited the hedonistic positioning of the corporate brand.

The second topic recently seen in the media is the opening date. MONA has never released an official date, and has therefore never had to meet any particular deadline. It has been variously noted in media articles that it will open March 2009, November 2009, and March 2010. The date now appears to be confirmed as occurring in January 2011, during or as part of that year's MOFO. That the opening date has never been confirmed officially reinforces the mystery surrounding MONA generally. There may be a reluctance by MONA to participate in the conventional marketing and advertising world but such manipulation of information is indicative of a strategic approach to how the brand is perceived.

Neither of these issues were the subject of media releases or announcements. That is not the style of MONA. In essence the stories were included as part of interviews and sponsored visits by select journalists. The motivation for MONA to act this way is perhaps part of the David Walsh philosophy, but it also has a practical basis. The dropping of the Moorilla name could have some backlash in the local community—the name change is now occurring more by stealth. Similarly, the opening date, being something of a moving feast, has been quietly made public. There has never had to be any damage control in relation to being 'late'.

The placement of these 'announcements' is also of interest. The article by Rhodes (2010) was from a blog which is part of the Collections Australia Network (CAN) website. CAN is one of the organisations that represents museum's interests and is a forum for all those involved in museums in Australia. It is, therefore, a perfect outlet for information on Australia's largest privately funded art museum. One of the issues for private art museums is reputation—MONA needs the legitimatisation of the museum, and art, community so as to fully participate in those communities, and to add authenticity to their brand. Whatever the radical or unconventional nature of the MONA consumer they will not visit unless the museum is seen as legitimate. Although aimed at a different target market, the Coslovich (2009) and Strickland (2009) articles have the same strategy behind them. One article is in the travel section of a major Australian newspaper and the other in a glossy magazine/newspaper supplement. Both

are ostensibly about previewing MONA's Pavilions, which both certainly do appropriately. However, their text draws on interviews with David Walsh, with the consequent opportunity to promote the MONA/Walsh philosophy, all to the educated, well-off reader of these particular publications.

The articles on The Pavilions served to strengthen brand recognition for MONA within a certain target market. Such a tactic is less obvious, but nonetheless apparent, with MOFO. As a festival of art and music it joins a growing number of festivals in Australia. As a festival it is mentioned on blogs, websites, art shows on television and radio, and it is reviewed in art and music magazines. Whenever MOFO is mentioned, so too is MONA: the millionaire gambler is mentioned, as is Brian Ritchie, and this year, John Cale. In this way, without a spending any money on advertising per se (there are posters, brochures, and catalogues), the brand MONA is promoted. Importantly, it is promoted in the media that connects with its target market, and with associations that reinforce its positioning.

Future directions

MONA is a work in the making. The art museum itself is 11 months from opening at the time of writing. How it will be received by its consumers can only be the source of conjecture. Some of the other products within the MONA brand are only now just starting to take on their hedonistic form having been something of a legacy needing rebranding. New products such as MOFO have quickly taken hold within Australia as distinctive and innovative cultural icons. For the future, though, MONA needs to make its mark internationally. The market for luxury brands is relatively small, particularly in a country with a population the size of Australia's. It might be said that the market for MONA's hedonistic experiences is even smaller. Also important is the fact art and cultural organisations need to be product driven. If they are not they risk their artistic integrity, the very thing that challenges their target markets (Colbert 2007). Who, then, is the target market that will take MONA into the future? David Walsh has been quoted as saying:

I want to target the world, but I want to target a very small percentage that might be interested in this subversive, adult kind of Disneyland... [they] might come from New York or Hobart, and if they come from New York, they'll justify the long trip and fairly large expense because the specific experience might have something to say to them (cited in Strickland 2009: 38).

The reference to Disneyland is a common one in MONA media commentary. With all its products having their home on the former Moorilla Estate property there is something of a theme park feel to the MONA experience. Even MOFO, which utilises many different venues around Hobart, uses the Moorilla site as its spiritual home. The question, of course, is will consumers be interested in hedonistic products essentially 'chosen' by MONA without regard to traditional consumer needs models.

Conclusions

There are perhaps too many themes evident in the story of MONA so far to draw conclusions. Certainly there has been the strategic development of a hedonistic experience brand. By virtue of the products offered, wine, beer, art, accommodation, and music, all positioned as parts of a sensual, hedonistic whole, it is clear that the MONA brand seeks to connect with those consumers open to the 'pleasures of life'. Just as clearly, though, this is the story of an individual vision. Could an organisation, with all the consequent constraints and pressures, be quite so cavalier with their choice and positioning of products? An organisation could seek to serve a similar niche market as MONA, but would it not have to pay regard to shareholders, revenue projections, or the like sooner or later? David Walsh has been quoted as saying that if nobody comes to MONA then he will close it and it will be his very expensive lounge room (Clark 2009).

Of course, the issue here is what are the lessons learned as regards marketing? In some ways they are classic marketing 101. Despite statements by David Walsh regarding his dislike of marketing, MONA has been marketed. Not advertising, using new media and public relations, having a controversial and enigmatic spokesperson, and offering art and cultural products of your own choosing—as opposed to those desired by an audience—is still marketing. As can be seen from the comments above, a target market of sorts has been

contemplated. While it is clear that the brand MONA has been created ad hoc, it has been consistently and strategically developed with an understanding of the way particular consumers think, even if those consumers are people with similar views on life as David Walsh and his MONA staff. For example, much of the marketing communications messages involve sensual imagery, avant-garde references and deliberately obscure and provocative statements. Further, the products themselves are high quality, individualistic and tailored to a niche. Throughout the branding the link to the pursuit of hedonistic experiences is clear. With this in mind, there is no doubt the MONA brand has changed over the last year or so, and in ways it seems likely were unexpected. However, in line with the MONA philosophy the unexpected is welcome, as MONA has the flexibility to make use of any opportunity that comes its way.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the interviewees from MONA for their willing co-operation, as well as research assistant Gemma Roach.

References

- Clark, J. (2009), "Private model: The Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart", Plenary speech, *Museums Australia National Conference*, Newcastle, May.
- Colbert, F. (2007), *Marketing culture and the arts* (3rd ed.), HEC Montreal, Montreal.
- Coslovich, G. (2007), "The collector", *The Age*, 14 April, Arts: 4.
- Coslovich, G. (2009), "Avant-garde by the river", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 December, Travel: 7.
- Elliot, A. J. and Covington, M. V. (2001), "Approach and avoidance motivation", *Educational Psychology Review*, 13 (2), 73–92.
- Engberg, J. (2009), "Southern Discomfort: Tasmania's Art Scene", *The Monthly*. Vol. 41: <http://www.themonthly.com.au/art-juliana-engberg-southern-discomfort-tasmania-s-art-scene-1336>, accessed 10 February 2010.
- MONA (2009), "Over the waterfall in a barrel: MONA", promotion brochure/newspaper insert, November.
- Neales, S. (2008), "Magnificent obsession", *The Mercury*. 6 September, Weekend,: B06.
- O'Shaughnessy, J. and O'Shaughnessy, N. (2002), "Marketing, the consumer society and hedonism", *European Journal of Marketing*, 36 (5/6), 524–547.
- Rhodes, S. (2010), "MONA: 'A subversive Disneyland for adults'", *CAN Outreach Blog – Collections Australia Network*, <http://keystone.collectionsaustralia.net/publisher/Outreach/?p=4072>, accessed 4 February 2010.
- Rozin, P. (1999), "Preadaption and the puzzles and properties of pleasure", in D. Kahneman, E. Diener and N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Wellbeing: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 109–133.
- Schwartzkoff, L. (2009), "Art lovers are sharing their passion through private galleries", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 July, News and Features: 12.
- Strickland, K. (2009), "Cutting Edge", *Life & Leisure: Luxury '09 (Australian Financial Review magazine)*, Issue 10, Oct –Dec, 36–38.
- Williams, A. (2006), "Tourism and hospitality marketing: Fantasy, feeling and fun", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 18 (6), 482–495.

Exhibits

Exhibit 1 – MONA construction site (author photograph)



MOORILLA REFINED WINE

The Muse Series is blended according to an old world philosophy, resulting in a sophisticated and bottle maturable wine. These wines present a thoughtful spectrum of flavour and aroma. While blended for ease of drinking in their youth, these wines will continue to improve in the bottle.

"The Greek of antiquity was caught up by the seriousness of the truth that [in wine] pleasure and pain, enlightenment and destruction, the lovable and the horrible, lived in close intimacy. It is this unity of the paradoxical which appeared in dionysiac ecstasy with staggering force."

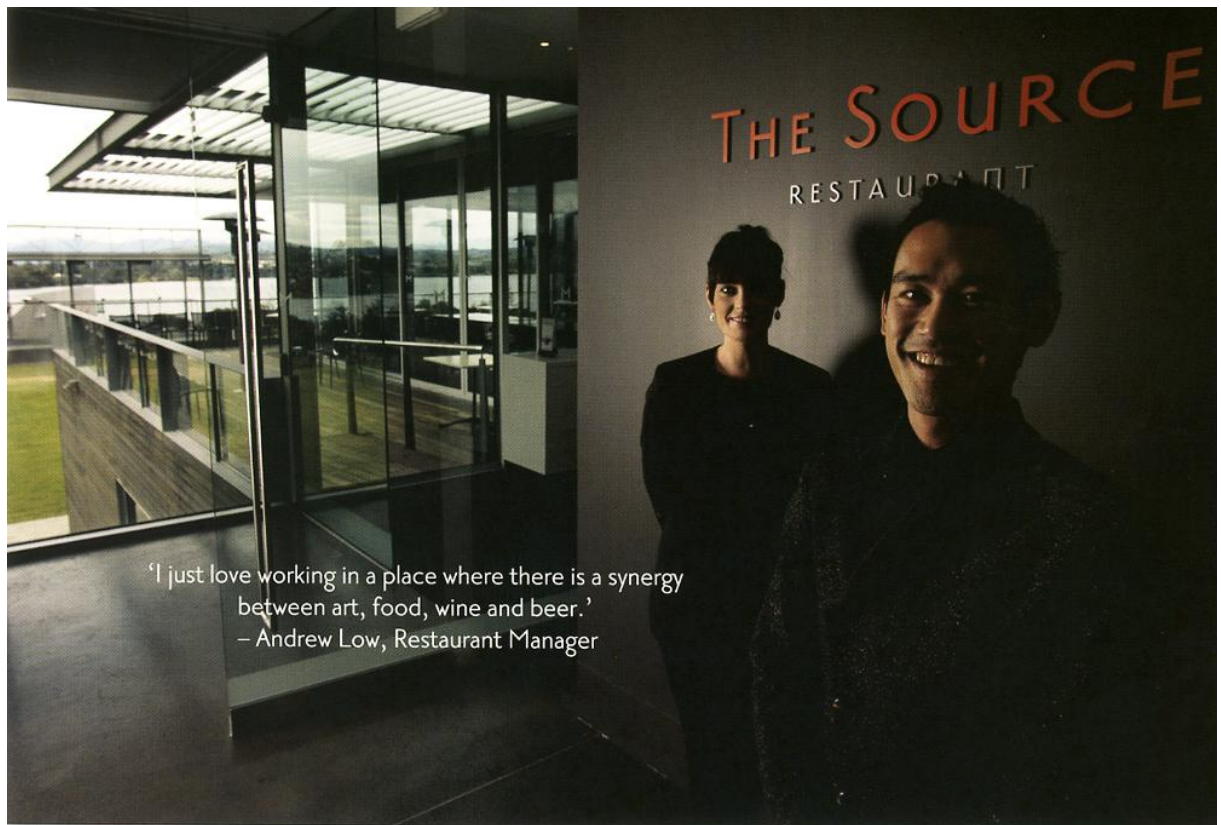
—Walter F. Otto



Exhibit 3 – MONA (2009), Moo Brew bottles



Exhibit 4 – MONA (2009), The Source restaurant



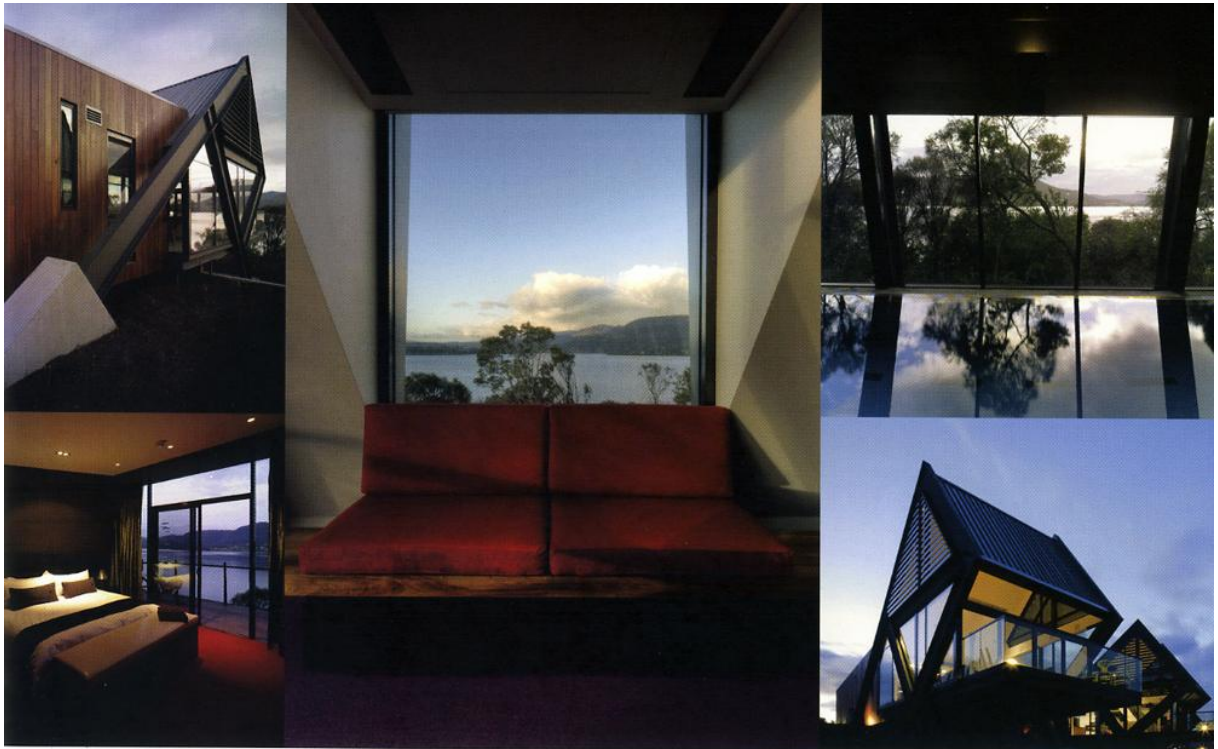
The Source Restaurant is on the first floor of the Ether Building. We aim to be the embodiment of the hoary saw 'Think globally, act locally'.

The wine list reflects a passion for the best old and new world wines. Vintage, seasonality and menu guide our cellar.

The Source is now open for breakfast and lunch seven days a week, and dinner on Friday and Saturdays.

Opening Times:
Breakfast 7 days from 7.30am to 10.30am
Lunch 7 days
from 12 to 2.30pm
Dinner Friday and Saturday nights until Easter
from 6.30pm

Exhibit 5 – MONA (2009), The Pavilions apartments



MONA has eight pavilions overlooking the Derwent River. Pavilions feature ancient and contemporary art (and bits in between). They are furnished by leading local and international designers.

Each pavilion has its own distinct character and is named after an artist or architect that impacted MONA.

Charles, Arthur, Sidney and Brett were designed by Crawford, Padas and Sherman Architects in 2001 and the interiors redesigned by Fender Katsalidis in 2009.

Each features an original painting by its eponymous artist, an antiquity and has a collection of ancient coins.

Roy, Robin, Esmond and Walter were designed in 2008 by Nonda Katsalidis. These pavilions feature video art from artists like Tamy Ben-Tor, an American performance artist who pokes fun at 'stupid rich people who buy art'.

All pavilions feature a fully equipped kitchen and laundry, an individual wine fridge and wireless touch panels for lighting, temperature, information and audiovisual control.

There is also a heated infinity pool, a sauna and a gymnasium.

Exhibit 6 – MONA (2009), MOFO

